Christmas and the Child in Us
Matthew 18:1-14
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John M. Buchanan

How many times have you heard or said, "Christmas is really for children"? Many times, I suspect, and the strange thing about that statement is that its is both compellingly true and grossly untrue, depending on who is saying it and why.

One thing is certain. The cultural year-end festival which happens at the same time as Christmas is very much oriented toward children. Ordinarily the statement "Christmas is for children" means that they are the beneficiaries; they get all the gifts: they express the seasonal excitement: visions of sugar plums dance in their heads. Mom and Dad just stay up late assembling all the parts and then pay the bills. Mom and Dad are the ones who wear themselves out with the seasonal traditions, so that expressions of happy affection become just one more job to get done. Mom and Dad listen to and believe the commercials that portray the joy of Christmas in terms of opening an even bigger Christmas Savings Fund for next year.

That's really not for children, at all. That's some kind of emotional crutch for adults who have yet to learn that children need year-round attention far more than a new sub-machine gun, and the security of love more than all the gifts money can buy.

And yet, the statement is profoundly true. Christmas is for children. Christmas is for all those whose adulthood has not robbed them of the freedom to laugh and love: for those - and there aren't many - who are still open and spontaneous and unselfconscious about expressing affection. Isn't that why we always include a child in whatever mental image we have of Christmas? We sense, I believe, that there is something about childhood that allows the message of Christmas to get through, in a way that it has long since stopped getting through to us. Christmas is for children; but more importantly, Christmas is for the child in uall of us.

One time the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God. He answered by bringing a little child in their midst and saying: "I tell you this: unless you turn round and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom." It was typical of him. He referred to children often, using their games to punctuate a story he was telling, allowing them to come to him when everyone else was tired and grouchy. He paid special attention to them, and I think it is safe to say that there was something about him that reached out and prompted their trust and love.

Now, it is terribly easy to oversimplify and become sentimental and end up totally missing the point here. He was not suggesting that grown men ought to be childish. He was not suggesting that adults ought to go through life mimicing children, living in the past, trying to capture something long gone. I suppose we all do it, to a degree; but there is an essential difference between childishness and childlikeness. One man puts it this way: the words of Jesus give "rise to the most poignant kind of awareness of how we ourselves were once children but are no longer, of the dreaming innocence we lost without ever intending to lose it..... Thus to read these words is to shed an inward tear, and although the tear itself is good and has much to teach us, we weep then to see ourselves weeping, and these are the tears of self-pity, and by them our vision is distorted and blurred instead of washed clean." [Frederick Buechner, The magnificent Defeat p. 132]

Jesus was not advocating childishness in things religious, although that is how he is interpreted many times. He was certainly not suggesting flippancy and irresponsibility and unthinking acceptance. That kind of religiosity is childish - and to it are directed the words of St. Paul: "When I was a child my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up I had finished with childish things." And later, "Do not be childish, my friends. Be as innocent of evil as babes, but at least be grown-up in your thinking." [I Cor. 13 and 14]

To be like a child, is not necessarily to be childish. What, then, did

he mean? What did he see in them? What is it, in us, that he was trying to reach?

I would suggest two approaches. There are characteristics of children that disappear with adulthood. I am concerned, primarily with two. The first may be called spontanaity, or freedom, or unselfconsciouness; the second falls into the category of trust, and the ability to trust.

There is a child in all of us, whether we are aware of it or not. At least so say the psychiatrists. All of us have three different persons inside - a parent - an adult - and a child. They are there regardless of our age: they function like computers into which whave been fed all the experiences of our past. Dr. Thomas Harris, summarizes the child in us as follows:

"In the child reside creativity, curiosity, the desire to explore and know, the urges to touch, feel and experience, and the recordings of the glorious, pristine feelings of first discovery..... In the child ane recorded the countless, grand "aha" experiences, the firsts in the life of a small person, the first drinking from the garden hose, the first stroking of the soft kitten.... the first time the lights go out in response to his flicking the switch, the first submarine chase of the bar of soap....." [I'm OK - Your're OK, p. 27]

Something happens to that in nearly all of us. If you care picture the parent - adult and child as three circles - the child circle keeps getting smaller, coming under the influence of the business-like adult and the protective, judgemental parent. It's still there, to be sure, but in most of us it remains pretty well hidden. And we don't respond freely and reach out openly to others, and enjoy the thrill of discovery.

The child in us, like real children, is not self conscious. It wants to express how we feel without standing outside and weighing the matter carefully. But part of maturing is the development of self consciousness - and that, in turn very quickly becomes image-cousciousness. We behave pretty much in

accordance with the image we attempt to project of ourselves. Thus certain things are taboo - because people in our position just don't act that way. And along the way, slowly - but surely - the child in us - the ability to laugh and love - gets squeezed out of the picture.

I dislike reading the words of other men too much from the pulpit, but recently I discovered a story that says it all. In his book "To a Dancing God" Dr. Sam Keen, philosopher and theologian discusses the loss of childlike spontanaity in a chapter entitled "Education for Serendipity".

"Long ago, when I wore short pants and shot marbles with my left hand, I formed an impression of education which has recently returned to haunt me. Mrs. Jones' first-grade classroom always seemed dark, but on this day it was more depressing than usual. For an eternal afternoon I sat practicing my penmanship exercises, listening to Mrs. Jones' monotone: 'make your i's come all the way up to the middle line. And don't forget to make your o's nice and round. Circle, circle, circle. Period. Now repeat.' Caught somewhere between boredom and despair I struggled against tears and settled in to wait for the resurection - the 3:00 bell.

And then it happened. A movement in a tree outside the window caught my eye and there, in the sweet and redeeming light of the springtime world, was a summer warbler building a nest. Caught in wonder I followed the progress of the nest construction and dreamt of the time when I would be a great ornothologist. My i's and o's were forgotten until Mrs. Jones materialized over my shoulder and demanded to know why three lines in my penmanship book were empty. Instinct warned me that no seredipitious warbler, no private fascination, could provide an excuse for the neglect of my serious educational duties. So I bit my tongue, cherished my wonder in silence, and stayed in after school to make up my lessons.

Mrs. Jones won more than the day. Schooling became a habit for me and I remained in the classroom for twenty-five years and five degrees without seriously questioning the maxim that private enthusiasm must be divorced

to wonder at a star, and tremble at the miracle of human birth - to love and laugh and cry because this thing is so beautiful and so good that the child in us can do not other. "At the birth of Jesus Christ reactions were unrestrained. Angels sang! Shepherds ran! Wise Men saddled up and rode! Herod raged!" [E. Campbell, The Protestant Hour] So it is still - for the child in us.

To be childlike is to be free and spontaneous and unselfconscious. It is also to trust. I've read and thought a lot about what it means to trust: I've thought about why we have such trouble trusting each other and how that may be the reason why we have trouble perceiving faith in God as a kind of ultimate, all-out trusting. But I don't think I really knew what trust meant until a child taught me, namely my own four year old son. It's a personal story. We were taking the children for polio shots, trying to discuss it in a way that would let them know what was coming, yet without frightening them. We were oblivious to the fact that the four year old had not had an injection since infancy, and not only wasn't understanding what we meant by a shot, but had an entirely different and frightening definition of the word. I did notice that he was unusually quiet in the car, that he stayed very close to me, that instead of running ahead with the others he insisted on holding my hand, that his grip tightened as we stood in line waiting. He survived the injection with a few tears and I still didn't know what was happening. He was still quiet - and on the way home it came out. He asked me simply - "Am I going to be with God now?"

To him, "shot" meant a rifle and pain and dying - which images are not too precise in his mind, but there nevertheless. And so a routine injection was, for him, a walk into the jaws of death. And he did so holding my hand, that is to say, trusting.

That taught me what Jesus meant when he brought a child into their midst and suggested that entrance into the Kingdom depended on their being like that

the educational task."

Sadly, wistfully, growing up does that to us. Becoming an adult, more often than not, means getting the i's and the o's correct, at the expense of responding with joy and curiosity and affection to the beauty right outside the window.

Children have the beautiful capacity - put there by the Creator - to live in the immediate moment alone: to experience the now: to respond to the experiences of the moment - the people of the moment with whatever feelings are being felt - without fear, without self consciousness. Adults lose that capacity, living partially in the past - partially in the future, weighing all the repercussions of one's responses - and very little in the present. There is nothing so honest and authentic as the prayer of a child. Or an expression of immediate affection in the energetic hug of a three year old. But adults - and we can't seem to help it - listen to themselves as they pray, and calculate the effect their words are having on those who are listening, and try desparately not to project an image that is too pious, or too cynical - but just right. And adults, as they love, stand apart, and observe their loving and measure the effect what they do will have on the loved one, and on their own self-image, and most of all on those who happen to be witnessing. How long has it been since you embraced your wife or husband simply because you felt like doing it? Or do you wait for the right moment, when no one is looking - certainly not when the children are around.

And along come Christmas, and it wears a little thin because we can't seem to handle the feelings it wants to evoke in us. In the simple images of Bethlehem - new born baby, mother, manger, shepherds - it addresses us on a deep level that we have learned to ignore. And so tears of joy are not shed, and the laughter gets smothered by the frantic rushing about, and the carols get sung as if it really didn't matter much.

Christmas addresses the child in us - the latent, well hidden ability

child. That taught me what faith in God as a trustworthy Father really means. Jesus meant that we should trust God - in the same way a child trusts his father.

Christmas addresses the Child in us. The love of God come down in a manger baby confronts us on that level of trust. It says that the King of the Universe, the Almighty Creator is like a trustworthy father: that because of what he has done, we are free to trust ultimately in his love. That's the simple, childlike message of Christmas.

Christmas really is for children, and for the child in everyone of us.

I would share with you several sentences written by Dag Hammaskjold in his diary (Markings) dated Christmas Eve, 1957. They catch the spirit of what I have been trying to say for twenty minutes.

"In thy wind - in thy light
How insignificant is everything else,
how small are we -
and how happy in that which
alone is great."

Amen.

Our Father, reawaken the child in us. As we repeat the familiar carols, and listen to the familiar stories - grant us to respond in the joy and love and happiness of childlikeness. Open us to the beauty of the birth - and the wonder of your coming among us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen